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Language use in the context of congruent and incongruent in-group behaviours

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A study is reported that examined language use in the explanations group members give for behaviours that are congruent or incongruent with in-group membership. It is shown that when people explain 'congruent behaviours' they use abstract terms (adjectives) that allow generalization beyond the immediate behaviour in question. In contrast, when they explain 'incongruent behaviours' by in-group members they do not use abstract terms, thus particularizing such behaviours. Additionally, it was shown that the choice of abstract positive terms in the case of congruent behaviours is used to enhance in-group identity, rather than resorting to derogation of in-group incongruent behaviours. The implications of these findings in the mediation of in-group-serving biases are discussed.

The study reported in this paper is concerned with how people use language to differentiate and maintain in-group identity. Although there is a considerable amount of research on different sociocognitive strategies employed by in-group members for this purpose, features of language as the medium by which communication about in-groups and out-groups is carried out has received little attention. It is the work of Maass, Salvi, Arcuri and Semin (1989) that has focused on the different linguistic strategies (e.g. choice of interpersonal terms, etc.) used in communication and their contribution to sustaining stereotypes.

In their study, Maass *et al.* (1989) examined the contribution of the language used by in-group and out-group members to the transmission and maintenance of social stereotypes (cf. Taylor & Jaggi, 1974). To this end, they employed the linguistic category model (Semin & Fiedler, 1988, 1991) as a methodological tool to investigate how different linguistic devices (verbs and adjectives) are used to contribute to this phenomenon. They were able to demonstrate that socially desirable in-group behaviours as well as socially undesirable out-group behaviours were encoded at a higher level of abstraction and socially undesirable in-group behaviours and socially desirable out-group behaviours were encoded at a lower level of abstraction. These findings were taken as supportive of their

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argument that socially undesirable behaviours by in-group members and desirable behaviours by out-group members are treated as exceptions to the rule and are therefore particularized by reference to situational and temporal constraints (i.e. more concrete language use). In contrast, socially desirable in-group behaviours and socially undesirable out-group behaviours are described in more abstract language, which contributes to the maintenance of existing images across the particular incidents in question. These conclusions are based on research with the linguistic category model (Semin & Fiedler, 1988, 1991), which proposes a fourfold taxonomy of interpersonal terms, from concrete to abstract linguistic categories. These consist of interpersonal verbs, namely descriptive action verbs (DAV), interpretive action verbs (IAV) and state verbs (SV), which are ordered on a continuum of concreteness and abstractness (from DAV to IAV, SV) with adjectives (ADJ) as the most abstract category. It has been repeatedly shown that the more abstract the category in question the more likely it is that the behaviour in question will be repeated at a future date; the more stable or enduring the property is that is expressed by such a term; the more informative it is about the person; the more difficult it is to invalidate such a property; and finally, the less informative it is about the specific context in which the behaviour is displayed (cf. Maass *et al.*, 1989; Semin & Fiedler, 1988, 1989, 1991, 1992; *inter alia*).

Maass *et al.*'s (1989) findings therefore show that the processes contributing to intergroup bias can be usefully explored by an approach highlighting properties of the language used in communication about intergroup relations. The present study was undertaken with a view to examining the generality of these findings by studying the 'linguistic intergroup bias' phenomenon using groups defined by highly relevant social categories from Italian political life. Further, the problem was approached by departing from the more unspecific desirable vs. undesirable behaviour conditions that the Maass *et al.* (1989) studies used. There are two possible explanations that could be used for the linguistic intergroup bias. On the one hand, one could argue that this bias is motivationally driven and helps to preserve or create a positively valued differentiation of a group from other social groups. On the other hand, one can argue that this bias is driven by expectancies, with expectancy-congruent behaviours being described abstractly and expectancy-congruent behaviours being described more concretely. Indeed, expectancy-based predictions are also supported from an attribution theoretical perspective (cf. Hewstone, 1989). There are a number of studies that show that behaviour congruent with expectations is attributed to stable and internal causes (abstract), whereas behaviours that are incongruent with expectations are attributed to situational or external factors (concrete) (e.g. Bell, Wicklund, Manko & Larkin, 1976; Hamilton, 1988; Hayden & Mischel, 1976; Regan, Straus & Fazio, 1974; *inter alia*).

We therefore examined the linguistic intergroup bias in the context of congruent and incongruent behaviours manifested by in-group members. This expectancy-based approach suggests that incongruent social behaviours should lead to a particularization of these behaviours, which would be expressed in the preferential use of concrete predicates. This type of language use expresses the temporal specificity of the action in question and does not allow for a generalization of the properties manifested in this action over time. In contrast, congruent behaviours should lead to generalization. The language used in descriptions of such behaviours is expected to manifest predominantly abstract predicates. These two linguistic strategies maintain in-group identity. Additionally, the semantic

valence of predicates (i.e. positivity vs. negativity) is expected to interact with predicate abstractness as a function of congruence versus incongruence. This is an outcome that would occur if one wishes to achieve a positive differentiation for the in-group. That is, for incongruent behaviours very few highly abstract positive predicates are expected.

These hypotheses were tested in a study in which two real groups were presented with plausible instances of action which were either congruent or incongruent with the behaviour repertoire of their in-group. They were then asked to explain why group members engaged in these activities. Their answers were analysed as a function of congruency of action (congruent vs. incongruent), type of predicate use (IAV vs. SV vs. ADJ) and group membership (Catholics vs. Communists) in a three-factorial experimental design.

Method

Subjects

In total, 52 members of *Comunione e Liberazione* (an Italian Catholic movement) and 52 members of the Italian Communist Party participated in this study on an unpaid voluntary basis. Subject gender within each group was controlled for (26 males vs. 26 females respectively). Participants were contacted individually by the first author during the annual general meeting of the respective groups.

Procedure

Half of the participants in each group (the Catholic movement vs. the Communist Party) were asked to give explanations for two activities congruent with the behaviour repertoire of their in-group whereas the other half of the subjects were asked to give explanations for two activities that were incongruent with the behavioural repertoire of their in-group. The activities in question were newspaper readership and participation in the annual meeting of the respective political parties. In the congruent condition, participants were asked (after some general instructions) to answer two open-ended questions concerning the explanations why members of their group read the central publication of their group (in the case of *Comunione Liberazione* this was *Il Sabato* and in the case of the Communists this was *L'Unità*) and why they went to their respective annual meetings. After each question they were provided with four lines of space to write down their answers.

The other half of the subjects in each group received a questionnaire in which they were informed of the following: 'Recent statistical surveys have shown that the political affiliations of people do not mean that members of social movements (for the Communists: political parties) refrain from reading publications of (participating in social meetings organized by) movements (political parties) founded upon an ideology opposite to their own. We would be very interested in finding out your views on this issue. Your answers will be treated in complete confidence'. Subsequently, these participants were told that some members of their own group were known to read the central publication of the out-group (*L'Unità* for subjects from the Catholic movement; and *Il Sabato* for members of the Communist Party) and that some in-group members went to annual meetings organized by the out-group ('Festival dell'Unità' for members belonging to the Catholic movement, and 'Meeting per l'Amicizia tra i Popoli' for subjects belonging to the Communist Party). Participants were asked to give their explanations as to why members of their group engaged in these activities. They were provided with four lines of space after the question to write down the explanations.

Independent variables

The first between-subjects factor was group membership (Catholics vs. Communists). Second, congruency of action was controlled for (congruent vs. incongruent), which was also a between-subject factor. Finally, we had a within-subjects factor, which was activity type (reading vs. participation). Additionally, we controlled for subject gender (male vs. female).

Dependent variables

Each answer was coded with respect to predicate type as involving either a descriptive action verb (DAV), an interpretive action verb (IAV), a state verb (SV) or adjective (ADJ) (Semin & Fiedler, 1988). Additionally, the semantic valence of the predicate (positive vs. negative) was coded. The reliability of the coding was undertaken by two independent coders who were blind to the conditions. Cohen's kappa for the inter-coder agreement was .87. This is very much in line with earlier reliability coefficients obtained across different language communities (e.g. Fiedler, Semin & Bolten, 1989; Maass *et al.*, 1989; Semin & Fiedler, 1989).

Results*Preliminary data analyses*

Figure 1 below shows the overall distribution of predicate use broken down by linguistic category and congruency of action. Since DAVs are less valenced (cf. Semin & Fiedler, 1991) and are often not found to display a differential use (cf. Fiedler & Semin, 1992) they were not included in the further analyses. Nevertheless, an ANOVA was performed on the arcsine-transformed DAV proportions to examine whether there were any systematic main effects or higher order interactions due to congruency of action. The independent

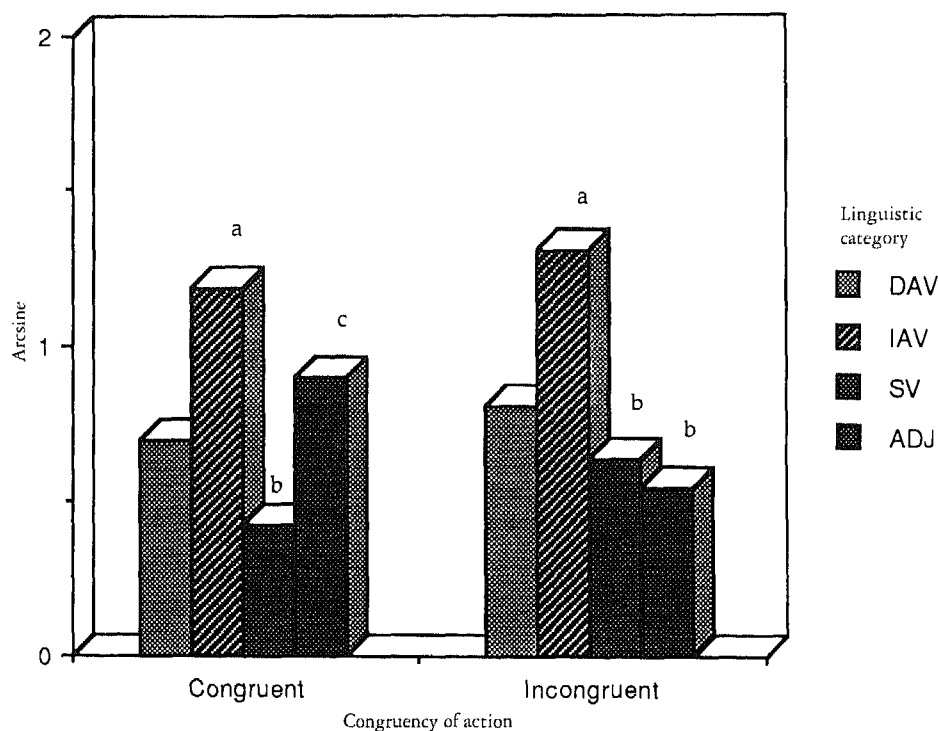


Figure 1. Arcsine-transformed proportions of predicate type as a function of congruency of action.

Note. Means not sharing the same subscripts differ from each other significantly at the .05 level (Newman-Keuls).

Key. DAV, descriptive action verb; IAV, interpretive action verb; SV, state verb; ADJ, adjective.

variables for this ANOVA were gender (male vs. female), congruency of action (congruent vs. incongruent), group membership (Catholics vs. Communists) and activity type (reading vs. participation), the last one being the only within-subjects factor. The arcsine-transformed DAV proportions constituted the dependent variable. This analysis produced no significant main or higher order effects involving the congruency of action factor: all F s were less than 1.00. Since DAV use does not vary as function of congruency of action (congruent vs. incongruent) this variable was excluded from the subsequent analyses.

Main analyses

For the main analysis testing the hypothesis in question, the arcsine-transformed proportions of predicate use as a function of gender (male vs. female), congruency of action (congruent vs. incongruent), group membership (Catholics vs. Communists), activity type (reading vs. participation) and predicate type (IAV vs. SV vs. ADJ) were examined in a five-factorial design with the last two factors as within-subjects factors. The analyses for gender and activity type revealed no significant first or higher order effects and are therefore not dealt with in the following. The prediction from the hypothesis is that there should be a significant interaction between congruency of action (congruent vs. incongruent) and predicate type (IAV vs. SV vs. ADJ). This term is significant ($F(2,200) = 3.15, p < .05$), reflecting the expected differential use of predicates as a function of congruent vs. incongruent in-group behaviour (see Fig. 1). An analysis of the simple mean differences within predicate type revealed that this interaction is mainly due to a significantly higher proportion of adjective use in the congruent condition ($M = 0.90$) in contrast to the incongruent condition ($M = 0.54$) ($t(1,102) = 2.26, p < .03$). The only other significant term was due to the predicate type factor ($F(2,200) = 18.60, p < .001$), reflecting an overall differential use of predicates. There is a predominant use of IAVs ($M = 1.25$) over ADJs ($M = 0.77$) over SVs ($M = 0.53$). All other F values were less than 1.00.

The second analysis focused on the semantic valence of predicate use. This was intended to see the degree to which the congruency of action manipulation influences positivity and negativity of the predicates used in explanations given. For this purpose an ANOVA was performed with the same factorial design as above, except that in this analysis predicates were utilized with only a positive valence and the proportion of predicates with negative semantic valence was omitted. The reason for omitting negatively valenced predicates from this analysis was that they occurred rarely if at all in the case of congruent behaviour. The overall proportion of negatively valenced predicates in the incongruent condition was only 17.35 per cent. This ANOVA yielded the expected significant interaction between predicate type (IAV vs. SV vs. ADJ) and congruency of action (congruent vs. incongruent) ($F(2,200) = 8.66, p < .001$), as shown in Fig. 2, suggesting that significantly more positive abstract terms ($M = 0.89$) are used with congruent actions than incongruent actions ($M = 0.14$) ($t(1,102) = 4.87, p < .01$). The other simple mean comparisons (IAV and SV) for congruency of action were insignificant.

Two further significant effects were observed. The first was due to the congruency of action factor ($F(1,100) = 11.07, p < .01$) and the other to predicate type ($F(2,200) = 8.66, p < .001$). These two main effects underline the obvious in that more positive terms are used for congruent activities and more IAVs are used overall than the other two pred-

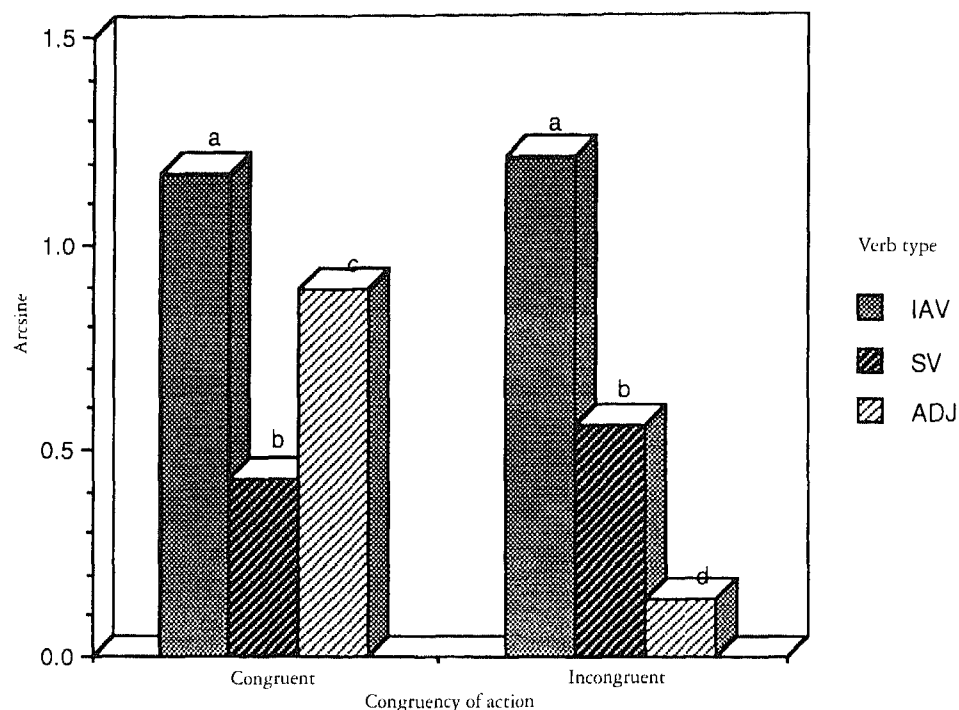


Figure 2. Arcsine values of positive predicates as a function of congruency of action.

Note. Means not sharing the same subscripts differ from each other significantly at the .05 level (Newman-Keuls).

Key. IAV, interpretive action verb; SV, state verb; ADJ, adjective.

icate categories. It should be noted, however, that the first main effect (congruency of action) is mainly due to a higher proportion of ADJ use in the congruent condition, as we noted above in discussing the second order interaction. Another way of doing the same analysis is by taking the difference score between positively valenced and negatively valenced predicates. The within-predicate types analysis revealed that there was a significant simple mean difference for the ADJ category ($F(1,103) = 57.22, p < .01$). There are more positive adjectives used in the congruent condition ($M = 0.90$) than the incongruent condition ($M = 0.31$).

Discussion

The findings of this study support the contention that members of in-groups show systematic differences in their strategic use of language when they are describing activities that are congruent with their own behavioural repertoire vs. those activities that are incongruent. In the description of activities congruent with the in-group behaviour repertoire there is a significant preference to employ more abstract predicates, namely adjectives, more frequently than more concrete predicates. In giving explanations for incongruent behaviours, people use predicates indicating enduring properties less frequently.

It is interesting to note that in giving their explanations for incongruent activities in-group members used a very low proportion of predicates with a negative semantic valence (17.35 per cent). This suggests that congruent vs. incongruent in-group member action is not conceptualized in a symmetrical manner. In Maass *et al.*'s (1989) study there is a clear experimental control of degree of social desirability and to that extent a symmetrical relation between desirable and undesirable behaviours. The research reported here, which focuses on congruence and incongruence of activities, suggests that a particular strategy used by in-group members is particularization, rather than 'derogation' (e.g. using semantically negative terms to describe incongruent behaviour). Thus, the contention of in-group-serving linguistic bias was supported by the higher proportion of abstract positive terms for congruent in-group activities and by the comparatively smaller proportion of positive terms in the incongruent conditions. While these findings lend support for the generality of 'linguistic intergroup bias' (Maass *et al.*, 1989) they also extend them in that they suggest that the mechanism that drives the bias may be expectation-based. The present findings indicate that, at least with respect to in-group behaviours, an expectancy-based explanation of how strategic language use is driven appears plausible. In fact, the findings of this study may be seen as pointing to a more general principle than the one suggested by the linguistic intergroup bias, namely: people communicate about behaviour that is congruent with their expectations more abstractly than about behaviour that is incongruent with their expectations. This particular conclusion obtained from an analysis of language use receives stronger support given the parallel findings in earlier attributional literature (e.g. Bell *et al.*, 1976; Hamilton, 1988; Hayden & Mischel, 1976; Hewstone, 1989; Regan *et al.*, 1974; *inter alia*). Nevertheless, they also indicate a need to separate congruence and desirability of behaviour in future experimental studies.

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